

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

---

The metaphor of the vine continues to animate the continuation of the *Final Discourse* or the *Farewell Address* to the disciples in John's gospel, but there is a shift in emphasis from the vine itself to an expansion of John's definition of the vine as "an abiding in love and the fruitfulness of this love." The disciples are expected to abide in the love of Jesus "by keeping the commandment to love." Jesus is here "always simultaneously comforting his own and preparing them for the future." The reason he reminds them from time to time of "what he is about" is so they will remember when he is gone. That memory will continue to inspire them. Taking up the language of the earlier shepherd discourse, Jesus now "identifies the laying down (of one's life) as not only an act of commandment-keeping but also an act of love for (one's) friends."

Why the focus on this new concept of *friendship* which we have not heretofore found vital to the teaching of Jesus? Well, it has to do with the fact that the disciples are no longer slaves but friends; that is to say, they no longer have a master-slave relationship with him. This has not occurred on the basis of anything they have done but rather "what he has done for them: he has made known to them everything that he has heard from the Father. In John, love and mutual knowledge, like love and commandment-keeping, go hand in hand."

There is a relationship of intimacy that is being developed here: "Jesus personally chose these disciples, included them in his closest counsel, and cared for them in a special way --- the way of friendship." But friendship is reciprocal. The disciples will demonstrate that they too are friends by following Jesus' commandment to love one another." Throughout John's narrative, the opposition to Jesus has been growing, but the followers of Jesus "by their belief become separate from the world and (thus) subject to the very opposition Jesus is (himself) confronting." The life of the believer is to be the same as Jesus' own life --- "active engagement with the world, with the aim that more will come to believe."

In the view of one scholar of John's gospel, we rarely use the idea of friendship to describe what John calls 'eternal life,' but for John *the life of salvation* is made possible through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. For John, then, "friendship is the ultimate relationship with God and one another." In Greek, the word for friend comes from the common verb for love, *phileo*, so in the New Testament a 'friend' is immediately understood as "one who loves." The openness of Jesus is not only "a model of how we are to treat one another...but also provides the wellspring that makes our acts of friendship possible."

The command to love is given by one who has himself done everything that love can do. He issues the command "because he has acted out, and will act out, the greatest thing that love can do. He has come

to make us more human, not less.” And this is why it is a mistake to use the idea of laying down one’s life for some purpose other than what Jesus had in mind. For example, in England during the First World War, “this text was used again and again, in sermons and lectures, set to music and sung by great choirs, with one single meaning; ‘therefore, you, young man --- they were mostly young men (listening) --- must go off to the front line, do what you’re told and if necessary die for your country.’” This is a perversion of the meaning of the passage and an excellent example of how we so frequently misuse scripture because we do not understand the context of the lessons we hear on Sunday morning. The New Testament was written nearly 2,000 years ago. It does not yield anything meaningful through a casual acquaintance. It needs to be studied and pondered in a serious way.

As one prominent New Testament scholar puts it, “I really struggled with how to make sense of (passages like those in John 15). For example, what are we to make of Jesus’ statement that “I have said these things so that my joy may be in you”? Joy in the midst of a call to lay down one’s life for one’s friend? “There’s already been the acknowledgement of troubled hearts. And in the next chapters will be words about rejection, and hatred and abandonment,” yet even here we find more joy. How can this be? After all, “joy is hard. It takes work. It takes effort. It takes intention.” Joy may very well be a feeling of grace, the emotion of grace, even the response to grace...joy amidst all that we can name in our own lives that is life-threatening or life-robbing because ultimately joy is the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune by the prospect of possessing what one desires. And those qualities --- *work, effort and intention* --- are what we need in order to make sense of some of the truly challenging passages of scripture we confront on a Sunday morning.

And I think as Christians we have an obligation to consider whole new ways of looking at a book as complex as the Gospel According to John. One analysis I have found helpful in this connection is The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic by John Shelby Spong, former Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark. Spong is a very controversial figure. His books tend to take the reader to the outer edges of orthodoxy which is why he has been heavily critiqued, particularly by ordained clergy in the highest positions in our church, people who believe they are called to the role of protectors of orthodox belief. But Spong has survived, and his works continue to expand our understanding of John’s gospel which is so very different from the Synoptic accounts. In his book on *The Fourth Gospel*, I think Spong’s own assessment of his interest in John is helpful: Because “John’s gospel helped to fuel such dreadful events in Christian history as heresy hunts and the Inquisition, throughout most of (his) professional career (he) was not drawn to the Fourth Gospel; indeed, (he) found it repellant.” And yet through careful and sustained study, he ultimately came to see John’s gospel as a work of Jewish mysticism... so that it no longer became ‘a visitor from another realm’ but a book about life --- expanded life, abundant life, and ultimately eternal life.”

Let me give you a bit more insight into Spong's view. He believes that "the author (of John's gospel) is challenging the atonement framework in which the Jesus story had begun to be couched in his generation." In the period of the writing of the gospels (from about 70-90 in the Common Era), the story of the cross "was increasingly told as the ultimate point at which the God presence in Jesus assumed the pain and overcame the evil that was the presumed reality of 'fallen' human life...and the cross came to be thought of by Christians as the place where the price of human sinfulness was paid, the moral score settled." But Spong finds a different person altogether in the author of John's account. For John, "God was not an external 'being' separated into a distant divine realm...Jesus was the life through whom and in whom God was being revealed. That is why John could portray Jesus and God as one...For John there was no fall into sin and thus no time when the human and the divine separated: one literally permeated the other. Since in John's mind God was not an external being, there was no division between God and life." Neither was Jesus "the victim whom God punished so that God did not have to punish the deserving sinners, nor substitute the sacrificial animal for the sinner. Those were concepts that this author could not have comprehended."

So, I think that view is worth hearing and contemplating. We should not be so sure that we have all of the answers when every generation naturally brings a new perspective to the study of ancient scriptures. Think how differently you would approach the study of the gospels if you brought Spong's view to bear on your hearing or reading: "The death of Jesus was not punishment; it was not paying the price which evil requires. It was rather the moment when the glory of God was ultimately revealed in the ability of Jesus to give his life away in love. The climax of Jesus' life on the cross was for John the ultimate revelation of the presence and meaning of God."

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen*

#### Sources

Meda Stamper, "Commentary on John 15: 9-17," [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

Robt. B. Kruschwitz, "I have called you friends," *Center for Christian Ethics*, Baylor University, Waco, TX, 2008

Mark A. Matson, *John*, *Interpretation Bible Studies*, Westminster John Knox Press, London, 2002

N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone*, part 2, SPCK, London, 2004

Karoline Lewis, "Choose joy," [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), 2015

John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper One, NY, 2013